

Playwright Naomi Iizuka explores the human experience with an eye for the visual

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Seattle continues to be a nurturing ground for playwright Naomi Iizuka.

Throughout the past dozen years, Iizuka has seen her plays produced by a variety of local theatre companies, including "Tattoo Girl" by Annex Theatre in 1994, "SKIN" by Printer's Devil Theatre in 1998, and "Language of Angels" by Theater Schmeater in 2001. Now, Seattle's Cornish College of the Arts is preparing to produce Iizuka's "Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls," a play in which friends and strangers encounter unfamiliar people and lands in the course of their travels. __Born in 1965 in Tokyo, Japan to an American mother of Spanish descent and a Japanese father, Iizuka grew up in the Netherlands, Indonesia and later Maryland. Her multiethnic background and global travel experience manifest themselves in her plays, in which she often utilizes the elements of a "journey" to dramatically structure her narratives. "Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls" combines the structure of a journey, for multiple characters, with what Cornish Theatre Department Chair Richard E.T. White describes as "fundamentally an affirmation of our ability to find connection and a sense of home in a fractured and rapidly transforming world."

The upcoming Cornish production of Iizuka's 1999 play hearkens back to a major thread in Iizuka's writing: an interest in the visual aspects of our world. One of the primary reasons for which "Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls" was selected by Cornish College is, according to White, its challenge for Cornish student designers.

Many Iizuka plays contain a specific visual component that must be addressed by the production designers. Some of her plays, such as "At the Vanishing Point" and "Polaroid Stories" (the latter produced in Seattle in 2003 by SsGoody Productions at the Capitol Hill Arts Center), have foregrounded photography and photographic images as a way of presenting these character studies more vividly. Iizuka says, "There's something very mysterious and moving to me about

photographs – this effort to freeze a moment in time, the distance between what’s captured in a photograph from the past and the present reality.”

Another specific kind of visual reference that Iizuka often incorporates into her plays is the tattoo, seen in “Tattoo Girl,” as well as in “Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls.”

“In some instances, tattoos are a very literal trace of an event or a person you want to remember,” Iizuka says. “But I also think the act of getting a tattoo is in some ways a way of facing up to your own mortality. Their permanence in the face of your own impermanence speaks to me.”

Despite her longstanding interest in the visual and its seeming permanence, Iizuka is also committed to exploring aspects of human experience that are much more difficult to pin down: the inner life and memories of her characters. Iizuka’s interest in photography is linked with her interest in the ephemeral nature of memories.

“I think a lot of my plays do deal with memory, the faultiness of memory, the need we feel to hold on to memories, the way in which memories shape a present,” she says.

Iizuka often uses monologues to pursue these explorations of inner life and memory. “I think monologues allow a window into a characters inner life,” says Iizuka. “It’s as though the everyday splits open and you can see inside or underneath. What’s interesting to me is when what’s going on inside the character is at odds with what they seem to be on the outside or how others see them.”

Monologues, photographs and other visual representations serve as devices that Iizuka uses to structure her work out of the minutiae of everyday feelings and experiences. “We have an impulse to create narratives, to make order of what can be a chaotic existence. I think that effort, that struggle is profoundly moving,” Iizuka says.

“Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls” offers fewer monologues and less structural solidity than many of Iizuka’s plays. She says that “on some level the characters in “Aloha” are careening through their lives at such velocity - particularly in the first act - that I’m not sure there’s as

much time for introspection.”

Instead of mere inward soul-searching, Cornish College students who work on this production of “Aloha” will have the opportunity to develop a variety of theatrical skills. The show’s director, Katjana Vadeboncouer, aims to encourage her student-actors “to make a deep commitment to both the whimsical and mythic qualities in this text,” as well as to practice a range of physical performance methods that correspond to “Aloha’s” comedy and its blurring of time and space.

Vadeboncouer adds, “I look to interpret Iizuka’s work through the filter of Absurd Realism as a means to not only make sense of the magic in the play, but also to fully transport the audience out of the realm of the ordinary.” In exploring the script, the actors will also be asked to delve into what Cornish Chair Richard White calls “a deep undercurrent of longing for emotional connection that is an excellent challenge for our young actors.”

Portraying those feelings of longing in “Aloha” will be complicated by the doubling (multiple roles played by a single actor) required by the script. Iizuka is frequently drawn to the use of doubling because, she says, “I’m struck by the degree to which people lead different lives and reveal different selves to different people in their lives.”

She adds, “I also think doubling is one of the most intriguing and inherently theatrical devices. That you have one actor embodying different characters or different sides of a self in this very literal way” is what leads Iizuka to make this choice in much of her work.

Iizuka continues her work on the self, memory and language in multiple current projects. Among these is a play that deals with the aftermath of the genocide in Cambodia, entitled “After A Hundred Years.” Iizuka also states, “I’m also about to start rehearsals for an adaptation of “Hamlet” that I’ve been working on for some time now with spoken word poets from Oakland. It’s a collaboration between California Shakespeare Theater and a theater group called Campo Santo.”

Although Iizuka hopes to visit Seattle for the Cornish production of “Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls,” she reports being busy combining these current playwriting projects with new motherhood. Nonetheless, Iizuka

retains great appreciation for her past associations with several Seattle theatres and artists: "I think one of the things that struck me was the vitality of the theater community and the strong sense of being a distinct community."

"Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls" runs Nov. 7-12 at 8 p.m., at the Raisbeck Performance Hall of the Cornish College of the Arts, 2015 Boren Ave., Seattle. There will be a post-play discussion on Nov. 11.